

Rainier Beach

PROFILE

Rainier Beach is a Residential Urban Village located in the southeast section of Seattle. The village's boundaries are defined roughly by Seward Park Avenue South and Lake Washington on the east, South Fletcher Street and Renton Avenue South on the south, Martin Luther King, Jr. Way South to the west, and South Cloverdale Street on the north (see map.) The "heart" of Rainier Beach is the mixed-use area near South Henderson Street and Rainier Avenue South, with public facilities to the north of the intersection and a commercial area south and east of that intersection known as "Beach Square." The village was designated partly in anticipation of a light rail station at MLK, Jr. Way and Henderson, to emphasize connections between the station and Beach Square. The village provides retail services to a larger surrounding area that stretches from Seward Park on the north to Renton on the south.

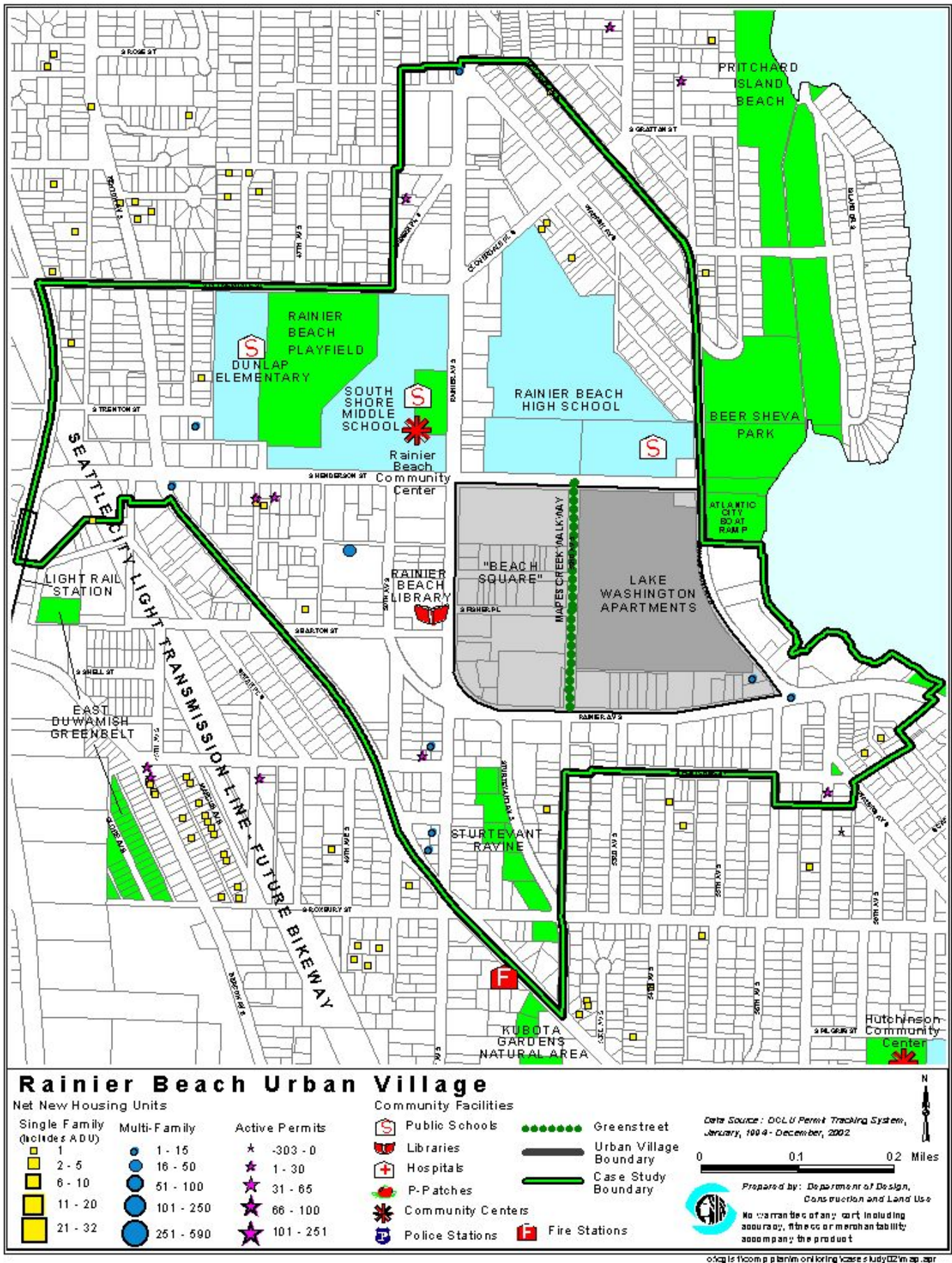
Rainier Beach is characterized by low density development and large public facilities, especially along arterial streets. The community has access to a broad range of public facilities, including three schools, a community center with an indoor pool, a library, beaches and public marinas, playfields and a number of parks. The village is settled in a valley adjacent to Lake Washington. Properties on the hills to the north and south of the urban village and along the lake have views across the lake. In spite of these amenities, it is generally a low-income and underdeveloped neighborhood.

NEIGHBORHOOD PLAN

The Rainier Beach Neighborhood Plan (RB2014) takes a geographically-specific approach by focusing on two locations as "cornerstones" for improvement: Henderson Street and Beach Square. The third "cornerstone" in the RB2014 plan is community education.

Henderson Street, the corridor through the heart of the village from the proposed light rail station on Martin Luther King, Jr. Way South to Lake Washington, is vital to the health of the community. Many public facilities are located along Henderson Street. The neighborhood's vision looks toward a pedestrian-oriented street that is the focus of pedestrian, bicycle and transit routes. Lining the street will be townhouses, mixed-use buildings and small commercial stores. Among the activities planned to implement this vision are:

- Locating an at-grade light rail station at MLK Jr. Way S. and South Henderson Street, with pedestrian improvements along the streets leading to the station, and an attractive bus transfer station.
- Improvements to South Henderson Street to emphasize non-automobile transportation modes including: a potential trolley or local bus circulators through the neighborhood, widened sidewalks and improved crosswalks, a streetscape design plan, new bicycle trails and improved lighting.
- Parking protections in the station area.



- Zoning changes to allow townhouse and small-lot single family zoning in the neighborhood, along with some commercial uses.
- Public/private partnerships to support the community.
- Improvements to the Rainier Beach Library and High School, an expansion of the activities available at the Rainier Beach Community Center and the development of a new public plaza at Rainier Avenue South and South Henderson Street.

Beach Square is the commercial core of the neighborhood. Its supermarkets and pharmacies serve the Rainier Beach community and the Rainier Valley south of Columbia City and MLK@ Holly. It is surrounded by community facilities: schools, a library, a community center, parks, and beaches. It also contains a number of vacant lots. The neighborhood plan seeks to revitalize this area. Among the tools the plan recommends are:

- Zoning changes to promote more pedestrian-oriented commercial and residential development in the Beach Square area.
- New design guidelines to shape development in the area.
- Collaboration among businesses, business association and non-profits on economic development activities.
- Improvements along Rainier Avenue South for the pedestrian environment, e.g. slow traffic, reduce the number of automobile entrances to shopping centers and allow on-street parking in off-peak hours.
- Additional pedestrian crossings through the neighborhood and pedestrian walkways through the shopping area, including a new walkway along 52nd Avenue South (the “Mapes Creek Walkway”).

The neighborhood plan’s third key strategy focuses on education as “the building block of the future.” The urban village contains three schools, and the plan seeks a future where “Rainier Beach will have an innovative, connected learning system that supports the integration of education into community life at all levels, and for all residents, resulting in the empowerment of the residents and the attainment of sustainable and beneficial changes in the community.” The topics covered by the neighborhood under this activity include:

- School facility replacement and improvement.
- Education programs promoting life-long learning.
- Community activism in the schools.
- Adult education.
- Formation of a PTA.
- Developing a local community education network.
- Increasing employment opportunities for residents: education to workforce.

GROWTH

Residential construction in Rainier Beach has been quite slow. From 1995 through 2002, 71 new housing units were added, or less than 10% of the 740 unit 20-year growth target. The Seattle Housing Authority built forty-three of those new units.

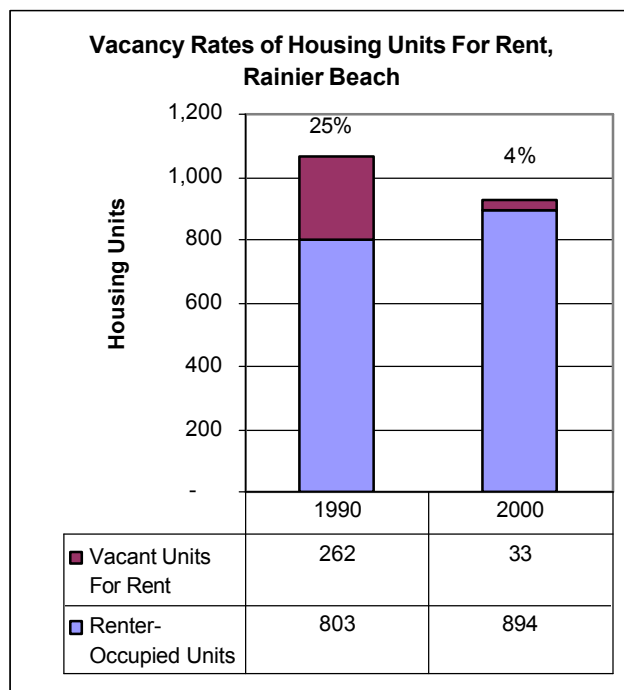
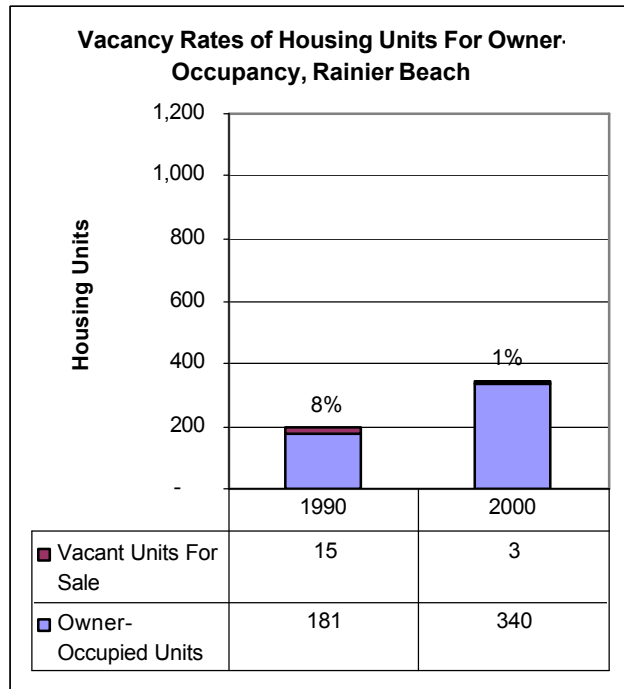
However, the neighborhood saw significant population growth without new development. The 2000 Census shows a population of 3,360, a 26% increase since 1990. The number of new households grew by 25% between 1990 and 2000. The additional residents absorbed vacant housing. Vacancies in owner occupancy housing fell from 8% in 1990 to 1% in 2000; and in rental housing from 25% to 4%. Two related trends were underway in the 1990s: vacant houses became occupied and rental housing was converted to owner-occupied housing.

As a Residential Urban Village, Rainier Beach has no target for new jobs, but it added 247 new jobs between 1995 and 2001, an increase of 27% — faster than the urban village average and faster than the city overall. Many of those new jobs were government jobs.

Development in Rainier Beach is inhibited chiefly by the difficulties in building housing affordable to the existing market (i.e. poor and working class families) or in making the area desirable to those with higher incomes. Rents in Rainier Beach are lower than in other parts of the City.

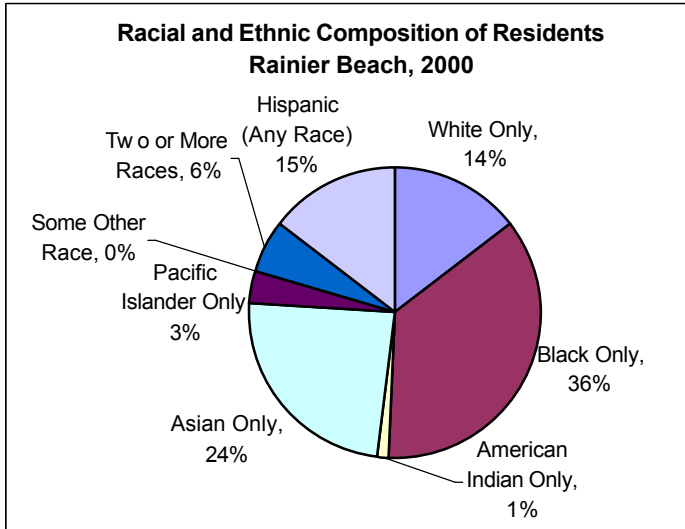
According to the neighborhood plan, developers face additional costs here due to

a high water table and underlying soil conditions (potential liquefaction.) Increased demand for housing in Rainier Beach, as shown by the significant drops in vacancy rates, could lead to higher rents, especially as Sound Transit builds a light rail station to serve the neighborhood. Higher rents would enable profits that could entice developers to undertake new projects. Many agree that property owners and the development community are waiting for clearer signs that Sound Transit will build the system.



DIVERSITY

Unlike much of Seattle, Rainier Beach's population contains a wide and growing number of racial and ethnic groups. People of color make up 86% of the population, versus 39% in all urban villages and 32% citywide. This includes an African-American population of 36%, an Asian population equal to 24%, and a Hispanic population equal to 15%. The

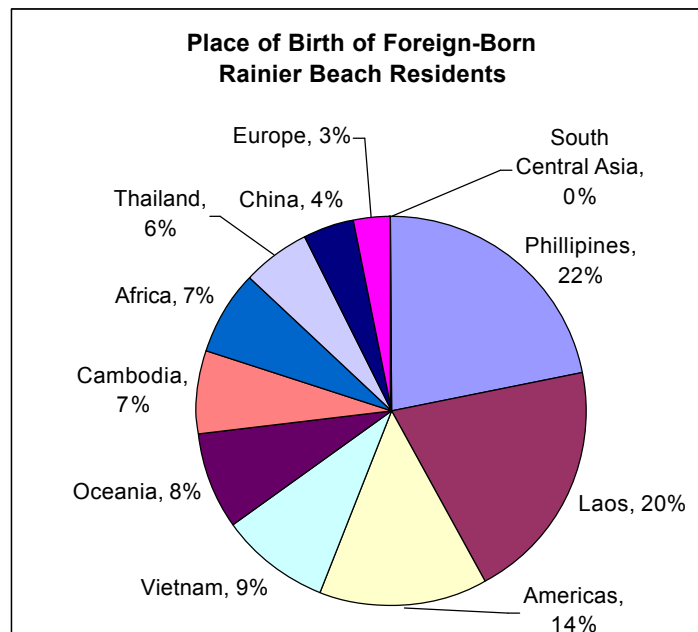


African-American population, while increasing in number, is not growing as fast as the Asian or Hispanic populations. In 1990, Rainier Beach was 44% black, 24% Asian, and 6% Hispanic. The number of Hispanics more than tripled in the 1990s (from 157 to 489). The number of whites also increased.

Rainier Beach is a popular neighborhood for immigrants; one third of residents are foreign born. A large portion of the population is from the Philippines

and other Southeast Asian countries. Mexico provides the largest share of non-Asian foreign born residents. Part of the attraction is comparatively affordable housing, and the many social service agencies existing nearby. While a large immigrant population can provide for an exciting and stimulating community, it also poses some challenges. Approximately 20% of households in Rainier Beach are "linguistically isolated" meaning that there is no one in the household who has English language skills. These households may have problems getting the services they need and are less able to participate in community activities. Immigrants are thought to account for a considerable number of families with children and seniors.

Households in Rainier Beach have a different composition than households in other parts of the city. Family households account for 58% of households in Rainier Beach compared to 44% citywide, and haven't changed much since 1990. The average size of a household in Rainier Beach fell slightly between 1990 and 2000, but at 2.6 persons per household it remains much higher than the citywide average. The percentage of households with



children (38%) is much higher than the city's (20%), but their share of households declined between 1990 and 2000. Family households accounted for 22% of the growth in households, versus the city's 10%. The percentage of households with seniors also fell.

	Rainier Beach			City of Seattle		
	1990	2000	Change	1990	2000	Change
Households	984	1,234	25%	236,702	258,499	9%
Household Size (Persons/Household)	2.62	2.60	-1%	2.09	2.08	0%
Percent of Households with Children	42%	38%	-4%	20%	19%	<1%
Percent of Households with Seniors	22%	18%	-4%	24%	19%	-5%

Rainier Beach's residents are 28% children, versus 16% in Seattle. On the other hand, the 25 to 39 year-old group, which is lower in Rainier Beach than citywide. Every age category increased in population over the 1990s, except for preschool-age children. Notably, the 40 to 54 year-old group grew 13% and accounted for 51% of the neighborhood's population change.

VIBRANT, PEDESTRIAN-ORIENTED COMMERCIAL AREAS

Although residents can often be seen walking to the many shops and community facilities in Rainier Beach, the urban village has become almost completely auto-oriented over the past 50 years. Many businesses are set back from the street with parking in front. Arterials are wide with speeding cars, and some of them do not have sidewalks. Sidewalks are missing in much of the



Rainier Avenue, looking north from the Rainier Beach Library.

surrounding residential neighborhood (only 40% of the residential streets in the neighborhood have sidewalks on at least one side of the street.) Much of the area is made up of "super-blocks" which means that distances from one street to another can be very long. Almost half of the commercially-zoned land in Rainier Beach is zoned Commercial 1 (C1), an auto-oriented zone characterized by large grocery stores set behind parking lots. Concerns about personal safety also limit pedestrian activity.

Redevelopment of the QFC has improved shopping opportunities and building appearances at the corner of Henderson and Rainier, and with the exception of 1999 (0% increase), taxable retail sales have grown every year since 1995. But redevelopment is not creating a pedestrian-friendly urban village.

The new Safeway redevelopment, which will include a larger building set back farther from the sidewalk behind a large parking lot, is a sore spot for neighborhood plan stewards. This property comprises a large portion of the Beach Square area and the stewards are disappointed that Safeway management was unwilling to accommodate the community's wishes for a mixed-use or pedestrian-oriented project. To make matters worse, Safeway is displacing a dozen or so small businesses who occupy small storefronts near Rainier Avenue. These businesses will be replaced by parking, or other auto-oriented activity, such as a gas station.

Safeway was unwilling to vary from its conventional development prototype and the current zoning permits that type of development. Rezoning was discouraged during neighborhood planning (here and elsewhere), with the thought that zoning debates might derail the planning process, and many urban villages had less land zoned for such auto-oriented projects. A rezoning study is currently underway by the City.

On the positive side, retail jobs increased 10% between 1995 and 2000. The community is gaining a new 54,000 square foot full-service grocery store and 7,000 square feet of other new commercial space.

A VARIETY OF HOUSING TYPES BUILT TO APPROPRIATE SCALE.

The housing stock in Rainier Beach is predominately small, older single-family homes and small-scale apartment buildings. Thirty-one percent (31%) of all housing units in the village are subsidized. Home ownership increased in the 1990s from 15% to 26%, higher than other urban villages (20% overall) but remained lower than the city's overall 47%. Approximately 20% of the housing units in the village are in single-family homes. Unlike many of the other urban villages, only three buildings in Rainier Beach contain a mix of residential and commercial uses.

Another remarkable trend is that despite the low number of newly built units, the number of units offered for owner-occupancy soared from 196 to 343 (up 75%), and rental units fell from 1,065 to 927. This means that Rainier Beach is becoming a more desirable investment for residents. During the last eight years, Southeast Effective Development (SEED) – a non-profit builder of affordable housing – built the Villa Park Townhomes and rehabilitated the Lake Washington Homes. What was once called “the sorriest looking apartment complex in Seattle” is now clean, safe and well maintained. This investment in Rainier Beach's housing is not reflected in growth data because it did not increase the number of units, but it may have set the stage and the tone for future residential development in Rainier Beach.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL AREAS

The relationship between the residential and commercial areas in Rainier Beach continues to follow a suburban model of automobile-oriented businesses separated from the surrounding residential community by busy arterials, lack of pedestrian facilities, and

lack of urban design elements that might entice pedestrians. Although the neighborhood plan presents a vision for how the different parts of the neighborhood could become more integrated, a lot of work remains before Rainier Beach becomes an area where the residential and commercial areas mesh. Some of that work is occurring, with projects such as the Mapes Creek Walk.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND OPEN SPACE WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE OF THE CORE

Community facilities may be Rainier Beach's greatest strength since many of these community building blocks are already in place. Within walking distance of Beach Square are two public elementary schools, one alternative school, a high school, a community center with a pool, a branch library, playfields and parks. Overall, approximately one quarter of the village is dedicated to public use. There is more than enough capacity for neighborhood children to go to school together, and Rainier Beach High School has space available for community meetings and a new performing arts center.

Parks and recreation opportunities abound in Rainier Beach, although some say that they are underutilized. Rainier Beach is covered 100% for breathing room open space, according to the Parks Department *Open Space Gaps Report*, and the vast majority is covered by village open space (1/4-mile buffer). Although only one park is actually located in the village, seven parks totaling more than 60 acres are within 1/2 mile of the village boundaries. This includes the Kubota Gardens, where Pro Parks funding will support improvements in 2003-2005.

Almost all of these facilities are receiving improvements. In addition to the new Rainier Beach Performing Arts Center and a partial renovation of the school, the school's fields are being improved. Dunlap Elementary was renovated in 2000. South Shore, a former middle school, is currently slated for renovation into a K-8 school in 2004-2005. The library has a \$3 million expansion funded for 2003 and the recreation center also will be renovated, both with bond and levy funds.

PARTNERSHIPS FOR SERVICES, ACTIVITIES, AND INTERACTION

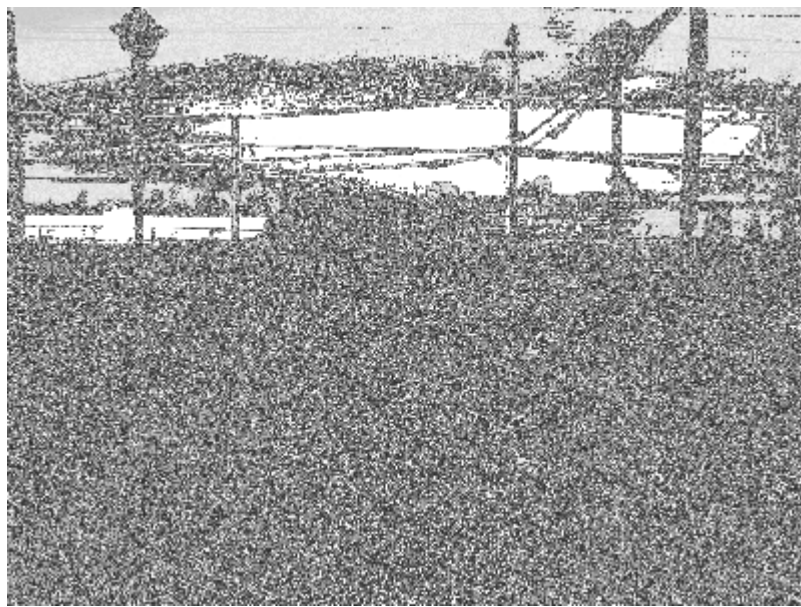
Rainier Beach has many active organizations, although it's not certain how much they partner with each other. Ten projects by ten different community organizations were funded by Neighborhood Matching Grants. Residents participate in the Southeast Weed-and-Seed program and the Thistle P-Patch. Neighborhood plan stewardship has been sustained, but it tends to occur project-by-project, and overall coordination depends upon staff in the City's Department of Neighborhoods. One organization, the Rainier Beach Merchants Association, oversees business-related objectives of the Neighborhood Plan; another (Rainier Beach Community Club) coordinates the education and housing aspects, and another separate organization works on the Mapes Creek Walk project.

MOBILITY

Rainier Beach enjoys adequate bus service, especially to downtown Seattle and points north, but walking and bicycling can be difficult. Conventional sidewalks and curbs along

residential streets are lacking and as in Greenwood-Phinney, walkways are often blocked by parked cars, forcing pedestrians into the street with traffic. Like Greenwood, Rainier Beach was in large part platted and developed before annexation to the City, and the County did not require these facilities developers.

A community group has teamed up with the City to make major improvement along the Mapes Creek/52nd Avenue South walk through Beach Square. This project includes developing a walkway and planting native plants in previously undeveloped public right-of-way along 52nd Avenue South, the path of Mapes Creek.



The Mapes Creek Walk provides a pedestrian passage between Henderson Street and Rainier Avenue South. It ends at this new public plaza across the street from Rainier Beach High School.

COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Rainier Beach has a strong identity as the City's southeast commercial center. Unfortunately, this historic identity has been somewhat of a weakness, since the neighborhood has had a reputation for public safety problems. The difficulty of bridging the many different languages spoken by community residents has also presented a barrier to building community.

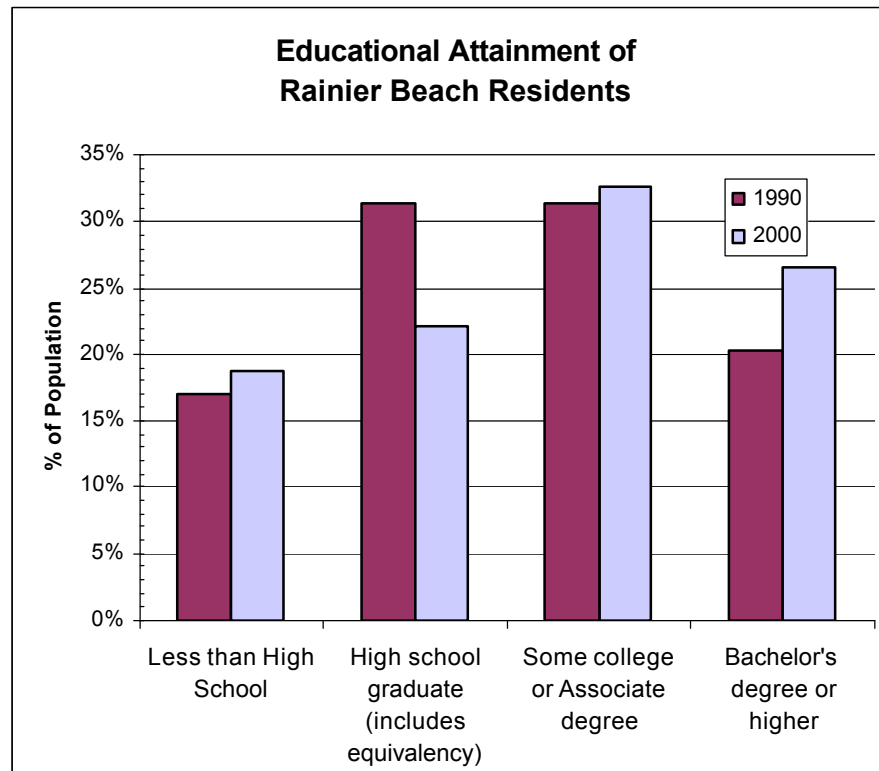
PUBLIC SAFETY

Between 1996 and 2001, crime dropped 33% percent in Rainier Beach. In 2000, the crime rate per capita in the neighborhood had fallen below the citywide average. Most of that drop in crime was in property crimes. Thefts and burglaries in 2001 were half their 1996 rate. On the other hand, violent crime rates have remained similar to their 1996 levels. Neighborhood stakeholders cite fear of crime as one of the reasons why many residents don't walk in the neighborhood.

EDUCATION

Education was one of the cornerstones of the Rainier Beach neighborhood plan. The plan sought "a future where Rainier Beach will have an innovative, connected learning system that supports the integration of education into community life at all levels, and for all

residents, resulting in the empowerment of the residents and the attainment of sustainable and beneficial changes in the community.” Rainier Beach has more residents with less than a high school education and more residents with at least some college education than it did in 1990. On the whole, Rainier Beach residents have less education than do other residents in Seattle, but Rainier Beach’s residents are more educated than the United States as a whole.



Increased education has been accompanied by increased employment. In 1990, 58% of residents over the age of 16 were employed; this grew to 61% of residents in 2000. However, this rate is lower than the citywide total. Seventy percent of Seattle’s residents were employed in 2000.

Rainier Beach has had a troubled history with its local schools over the last ten years. Dissatisfaction with Rainier Beach High School has risen to the point that there were weekly pickets in front of the school, before its principal was fired in 2000. More recently, students have protested in the streets, demanding more funding for books. Enrollment at Rainier Beach High fell 16% between 1995 and 2001, making Rainier Beach the smallest high school in the city. It also has the lowest cumulative GPA in the city, down to 2.27 in 2001. Attendance at Rainier Beach is the lowest in the city. On the bright side, Rainier Beach’s basketball teams have been ranked among the best in the nation, and have become a rallying point for the community.

Dunlap Elementary, which received a historic renovation in 2000, has grown significantly between 1995 and 2001. It now has 404 students, up from 228 in 1995. However, fewer students are choosing to attend Dunlap. In 1995, the school was first choice of 94% of its students. In 2001, it was first choice of only 38.6% of students.

South Shore Middle School was moved to a building farther north in the Rainier Valley in 1999, in order to move away from a noisy “open concept” building. The existing building now houses two alternative schools: the South Lake High School, a re-entry school serving students who have not been able to function at other high schools; and the New School, which opened in 2002 as an experimental school with funding from the

Stuart Sloan Foundation. The New School will be open year-round and will eventually serve students in kindergarten through 8th grade.

Community relations with the schools appear to still be strained. Opportunities for the community and the schools to work together have improved with the removal of a controversial principal at Rainier Beach and new community access to Rainier Beach after school. However, community members report that they find it difficult to become involved in school district decision-making. Parents recently protested the hiring process for the new Dunlap principal because they felt that they were not involved in the decision-making. Community members are also concerned about the future of the South Shore facility as it is renovated, especially as it appears that there may no longer be space for South Lake High School in the South Shore building as the New School grows.

Other educational opportunities have increased in the area, but not necessarily within Rainier Beach. South Seattle Community College now provides classes at NewHolly's Campus of Learners, easily accessible by bus from Rainier Beach. However, the community had hoped that some of those opportunities would be available within their urban village.

SUMMARY

Rainier Beach is growing, but has not yet experienced much change to the built environment. New residents since 1990 have mainly occupied previously vacant units. Homeownership rose notably in the 1990s, but nearly one-third of all dwellings in Rainier Beach is subsidized.

Perhaps because average incomes are relatively low, growth has not revitalized many of the commercial areas of the village, although both of the neighborhood's grocery stores have been redeveloped in the last five years. The community's special concern for education has had mixed results. The community is better educated today than it was ten years ago, but its schools remain some of the most troubled in the city. The total crime rate has dropped below the citywide average, but violent crimes are not dropping, leading to some fear in the community. While the Rainier Beach Merchants Association is working to attract businesses to the area, the neighborhood is waiting for the Sound Transit light rail project to bring more people into the village.